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HAPPY DEATH MEN

By

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B.S., University of Louisville, 2004
B.A., University of Louisville, 2010

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of the Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

Department of English
University of Louisville
Louisville, KY

May 2012

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A Thesis Approved on

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ABSTRACT

HAPPY DEATH MEN

Jessica M. Fletcher

April 23, 2012

Happy Death Men is a series of excerpts from a novel of the same name. It is a work of magical realism that follows in the footsteps of Haruki Murakami and Neil Gaiman. The novel consists of two main storylines, one about a widower named Henry, and the other about his grandson, Tory, both of whose experiences with the supernatural helps them overcome their respective loneliness. This novel explores the idea of being alive, but not living and the ideas of passivity versus taking an active role to change one's life.

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CHAPTER 1

The local newscaster's voice bled out of the old radio on the back of the toilet, slow and warm with the inane goings on of the town, but nothing about an earthquake. The old man put his shaking hands together, cupping the rushing cold water that poured from the faucet into clear little pools before splashing it over his face. He had been dreaming of Dante's Satan, enormous and frozen in the center of the earth, when the shaking started. It was just like the picture he'd seen in school, except he was the body caught in Satan's teeth with just his legs hanging out. At first he thought that the rumbling was the beast, finally released from the icy prison, flapping its great wings to take him somewhere else after all these years, but once he opened his eyes, all he saw was the darkness of his own bedroom. He could still feel the hot, slick tongue writhing under his torso as he stood in his boxers and worn out white t-shirt, staring at his face in the cold white light of the small bathroom.

With closed eyes, he took a few slow, deep breaths, willing his body and mind to calm down until his hands finally stopped shaking. As he dried his hands and face, a little bird, a blue jay, he thought, began singing near the bedroom window, bright and cheerful, reminding him that he was awake and safe in his little bathroom. He relaxed as the tension slipped from his body, sliding down his spine and legs, finally crawling from the ends of his toes into the cracks of the hardwood floor. "It was just a dream," he said, feeling foolish, as he closed the lid to the toilet and sat down, grabbing the Cornhuskers

from the sink. He slipped his feet out of his house shoes and rubbed the cloudy liquid into his skin, flexing his toes and ankles in slow noisy circles, getting out all the stiffness and creaks before he stood up again. A series of pops ran down his spine as he stretched.

“Lord a’mercy.” He washed his hands and used what water was left on them to smooth his coarse, graying hair; that lick in the back never wanted to stay down. He had half a mind to buy some of that gel or hairspray they’re always advertising on TV just to show it who’s boss.

He hummed along with the bird and dried his hands off. Sticking out his chin, he turned his head this way and that, examining his whiskers. “It’ll be all right ‘til tomorrow, I suppose,” he said, rubbing the scratchy stubble with his hand. As his fingers ran over his upper lip, the smell of earth and worms slipped into his nose, slithering up his nasal passage and down his throat, so thick he could taste it. He looked at the back of his hands, inspecting the nails. Clean, as they always were. He gazed at his reflection once again, sighing. “You look old, Henry.”

He squeezed a generous amount of toothpaste onto his frayed blue toothbrush and the minty white paste filled his mouth, overpowering the unpleasant earthiness that had filled it. It was the strongest tasting stuff he’d found yet. He brushed his teeth quickly, then furiously scrubbed the roof of his mouth, almost gagging as he brushed the back of his tongue. Rinsing, he took a mouthful of Listerine, letting the acrid liquid coat every surface of his mouth; he gargled before finally spitting it out, yellow and disgusting as it swirled in the sink. Its resemblance to urine never ceased to amaze him. “You’d think they want to do something about that,” he said, wiping his mouth.

He began humming again with a little shuffle in his step as he walked back to his bedroom. The bird was so loud, he figured its nest had to be right by the window. The sky was just barely beginning to lighten enough that he could see the edges of the trees against it. He'd thought that the days of waking up at dawn would be over once he left the workforce. "So much for that," he snorted. The contempt he'd had for his alarm clock when he was working led him to throw the thing out the very day he'd retired. There was a wall clock, but the batteries had long since stopped working. It was forever 6:19 in his bedroom and he was perfectly fine with that. As he slipped into his flannel pajamas, he whistled some off key Hank Williams' accompaniment with the bird. He pulled his red plaid robe tight around himself and turned towards the door, "Tramp on the Street" warbling out from between his lips all the while.

The house shuddered again, shaking for a few seconds before settling into stillness. His heart leapt into his throat as he froze, startled, suddenly immersed in a heavy silence. He waited. Nothing. No sound, no movement. Grabbing the flashlight off his nightstand, he walked to the window and opened it; the cold air wrapped around him as he stuck his head out of the dormer, trying to see much as he could. Every light down his dead end street was off; it was just his house after all. The world was quiet and still, covered in a frost that glistened as the light slid across it. It was the sort of calm that always reminded him of Christmas Eve. "Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse," his voice slipped into the darkness, disappearing so quickly he wondered if he had even spoken out loud or if it had just been in his head. He took a deep, cold breath and let it out in a white cloud before pulling himself back in and shutting the window.

The stairs croaked at him as he made his way down. "I know how you feel," he told them, turning the thermostat up a couple degrees on his way to the kitchen. "Highway robbery," he said, thinking about the coming light bills. Grabbing a bowl from the dish drainer, he fixed himself some oatmeal in the microwave and sliced the last of his persimmons as he waited. Of course, he had to taste a couple slices, "just to make sure they're fit to eat," he chuckled, winking. The microwave beeped at him and he took the bowl out with a hiss. "Shit!" he said, kissing his scalded fingers. Why didn't he ever think to use a pot holder? He shook his hand. "Hell far." Leaving the oatmeal to cool on the counter, he finished chopping the persimmons and placed them into the bowl. The jar of chopped hickory nuts on the counter caught his eye and he added a handful of them as well. Finishing it off with a teaspoon of honey, he set his breakfast on the table to let it cool a bit more.

He poured a pot full of water into the old coffee maker and sat down at the table, a twinge of guilt hitting him as he glanced at the shiny contraption in the back corner. He'd never figured out how to use that thing his daughter had given him last Christmas. Coffee wasn't meant to be complicated, but he left the thing out so it at least looked like he appreciated it. Lord knew he'd forget to get it back out for her visits if he did put it away and then her feelings would be hurt. He sighed. The pleasant bubbling noise filled the room and he waited impatiently for that first whiff of coffee to fill his nose. Black coffee and oatmeal had been his breakfast for so long that he didn't feel right if he didn't have them. He stirred the oatmeal and blew on a spoonful before tasting it, still a little warm, but he could eat it. The comforting smell of oatmeal was faintly tinted with the sweetness of the persimmons as the steam curled out of the bowl and into the room.

Through the window, the faintest hint of pink showed just at the top of the tree line where a few stars twinkled brightly at the edge of the night. He suddenly remembered that earthy smell on his hand and looked away, concentrating on the bowl in front of him as the warmth of the oatmeal slid down his throat and filled his belly. Eating slowly, he kept an eye on the slow progression of the line of coffee climbing the side of the pot. "*A watched pot never boils,*" that familiar, knowing voice chided in his head. "I suppose a watched sunrise never comes either," he mumbled, shifting his eyes back to the ever brightening sky. A little lump began to grow in his throat. Why did it take so long? If only he could have slept in, he thought; at least then he wouldn't have to wait for daylight. He wished he could still enjoy the soft colors as they spread across the blue the way he used to; they made him think of things he didn't want to think about. His chin tightened.

Looking back down at his bowl, he scooped up a heaping spoonful of oatmeal. The oats were bland and gloopy on his tongue, but he chewed vigorously and told himself he liked it. Taking another bite, he focused on the sweetness of the persimmons, remembering how he'd picked them just after the first frost when the orange fruit blushed with red. He always got a rush when he beat the deer to them, filling both of the old gallon ice cream buckets until they threatened to overflow and giving the beasts a "take that" on his way back to the house. A little smile tugged at the edge of his mouth and the tightness that had crept up on him crawled back down where it belonged.

The kitchen had grown quiet and he glanced up to see the coffee pot full and waiting. He filled a worn, ceramic mug with the hot liquid and settled back down at the table, finishing the last couple bites of his oatmeal before grabbing his coffee and heading

to the living room. The television flipped on to one of those gratingly bright morning shows where the blond anchor always smiled so big it made his face hurt. He hated to listen to her stupidly cheerful voice so early in the morning, but he had to hear the weather. They always hid it, forcing you to watch for an hour just to get a thirty second forecast. He took a long, warm drink of coffee and waited. Finally, after some story about a frou-frou dog that had won a local best in show, the weatherman appeared in front of a map talking about a strong cold front that started moving in shortly after midnight. Clouds were coming in and the temperature would be dropping all day, down into the upper 20s overnight. He thought about the light bill again. "Robbery, robbery," he said, pushing the back of the chair down a little more and closed his eyes.

A large bang from upstairs jarred him out of sleep; he listened for the familiar creaking that usually followed such noises, shuddering as they moved around the bedroom. He'd lost track of how long it'd been going on. She'd probably knocked over the stack of books he had on the bedside table, he thought, shaking his head. He pushed himself up carefully from the recliner and grabbed his coffee cup, shuffling to the kitchen to check the time. It was just after eleven. Mail should be here by now, he thought, going back through the family room, opening the door and stepping onto the cold concrete porch in his slippers. "Hello, Tom," he said to the gray tomcat sniffing at one of the evergreen bushes in the front yard. The cat hopped up the stairs to the porch and the old man bent down, scratching the cat's head as it purred and rubbed against his legs. "I'll get you some food in a minute." The cold air seeped through his clothes and he quickly made his way down the steps and down the walk. He pushed through the gate and took the

paper from the box, checking the date. Saturday, November 13. "Damn it," he thought as his eyes shot upward toward his bedroom window, catching the movement of the curtains. Folding the paper, he tucked it under his arm and hurried back, grabbing the cat's dishes before stepping through the door.

He fixed a can of tuna for the cat, rinsing and refilling the water bowl before taking them both back to the front porch where the cat was curled up on the peeling white paint of the old wooden swing. It hopped off and the swing rocked, creaking noisily from neglect. The cat moved against his leg just quickly enough to say thank you before eating its lunch and Henry stepped back into the warmth of the house. Deciding on a ham and cheese sandwich, he filled his cup with the old coffee still left in the pot from this morning and sat back down in his chair in the living room. He flipped through the channels again, before settling on a PBS cooking show. Too bad it wasn't Bob Ross. He always liked to see the little squirrels ol' Bob had raised.

From the corner of his eye, he could see part of the word "Thanksgiving" on the front page of the paper. "That's right," he said, looking around the living room. "That's coming up soon." He scowled. He liked seeing his family, but they fussed over him just a little too much these days. Especially his daughter, Vicki. She was a regular mother hen. Grabbing a pen and notepad from the side table, he began making a list of things he'd need for the dinner, trying to remember what he had. "What else goes in dressing? Oh, right," he said, scribbling "cream of celery soup" onto the paper. He damn sure wasn't going to be treated like some invalid by his children. She had fussed for an hour on the phone last week when he told her he was cooking Thanksgiving dinner.

"But Daddy," she whined, "you don't need to be doing all that. I can do it."

Thank you, but I am more than capable myself, young lady, he'd thought. He didn't dare say it like that out loud. After he had reassured her that he was doing it because he wanted to, she finally gave in. He rubbed his jaw in thought again. "Vicki's bringing the pie and rolls. Anything else?" Doing a quick roll call of kids and grandkids, he thought he remembered that Dale's oldest boy didn't eat meat. "Well, that's that," the old man said, making a note on list not to put butter on anything and put the notepad back before grabbing the paper.

He took a bite of his sandwich and opened the paper; Thanksgiving recipes and a one-person car crash were front page news. So goes small town life, he thought, flipping back to the obituaries to see who had died. There were several this week; it always unnerved him if there were more than two or three because it seemed to raise the odds that his name would be there soon. He took a sip of his coffee and made a face. The coffee had been on the burner too long to taste good, but he drank it anyway. No point in wasting it. He read through the names; a couple former residents, three from surrounding counties and one name he recognized, but couldn't place. No one he couldn't live without, he supposed. He leafed through the paper; deed transfers, engagement announcements, local sports, nothing worth knowing about. He couldn't focus anyway. He hated Saturdays.

Dread weighed heavily on him as his eyes drifted to the back of the house, to the makeshift bedroom with the boarded up windows, to the greenhouse. He wished he could just tear it down and be done with it. Sighing, he ran his hand through his hair roughly; there was no point in putting it off any longer. At least when it was over, he thought, he could relax for another week. Finishing his sandwich, he headed upstairs to change

clothes. The books were scattered on the floor and he picked them back up, laying them on the bed, doing his best to ignore the faint humming he thought he heard in the bathroom. Changing clothes, he went back downstairs where his old brown work boots sat at the edge of the kitchen, lacing each one up tightly before standing and taking a deep breath to steel himself. With his eyes firmly fixed on the floor, he passed the dust covered hospital bed in the corner of the utility room as he made his weekly trek into the greenhouse. Advancements in technology allowed him to control everything from inside the house. The temperature, light, even the sprinkler system had indoor controls. As he opened the door, the humidity that hit him as he stepped into the greenhouse was reminiscent of summer and the smell of dirt was mixed with the sweet stench of the blooms. He breathed through his mouth and shut the door behind him.

He had loved flowers, once upon a time. Any flowers, really. Sunflowers, daisies, petunias, peonies. Anything but carnations. They smelled like funeral homes, a smell that, he realized, would surround him soon enough. The large back yard was once a well groomed wonderland, filled with bursts of colored petals, green vines, and hummingbirds darting from bloom to bloom. He had even planted a butterfly garden along the west wall a few years ago. Many a morning had he spent on the little wooden bench across from it, drinking his morning coffee and talking to the flowers. He said it made them grow better; she always laughed when he said that. When she got sick, he closed in the back deck, transforming it into a makeshift green house for her. Towards the end, when she couldn't get out of bed anymore, he turned the utility room into a bedroom and placed the most beautiful flowers in front of the window so she could always see them. She told him not to cry.

It happened quickly. That's what everyone says, but it was true for her. She held on for so long and then suddenly, her body just gave up. For the first couple of weeks, he didn't do anything. Dale left as soon as the funeral was over, probably crawling into a bottle somewhere while Vicki stayed for a week, fussing over him and anyone else who came in the house, driving everyone crazy before he finally shooed back to her life far from here.

Friends and family members came by often at first and he always smiled and said he was doing all right, "she's in a better place now," and all that. When they stopped coming by, the silence was overwhelming. He heard things; his eyes played tricks on him. Sometimes he thought he saw her walk past a doorway, other times she was humming in the shower. He never told a soul. The last thing he wanted was to be pitied. One day, he saw her go into the greenhouse. She looked so real, so alive, that he followed her, knocking over a chair as he ran through the kitchen, breathing in the lingering scent of her perfume. He had flung the door open expecting to see her with her nose in a flower, looking at him with a pleased smile. Instead, he saw dead flowers, brown and bent over their pots, slick with rot. There was a mess of leaves and petals all over the floor. He was so ashamed. He grabbed the bucket and began picking up the precious flowers. That was the first Saturday.

There was no rhyme or reason for what he was doing; he knew that, but he couldn't not do it. He picked up the bucket that sat just inside the doorway of the greenhouse that she'd found at a yard sale just after they'd bought the house. Rust had begun to eat through a few spots on the bottom and the sides. It seemed fitting. Starting with the floor, he picked up the fallen blooms and petals, cradling them carefully in his

meaty hands before tossing them in the bucket. Using scissors, he clipped off any dead or dying blossoms and tossed them in as well. Any dead leaves or petals were plucked from the pots, leaving the soil clean and dark. The petals went with the flowers, the foliage fell to the floor. When he was finished, he swept up the leaves and anything else on the floor with the ragged broom and pushed the pile to the outside door, opening it and sweeping them out. His breath came out in white puffs and he brushed the steps off quickly before going back inside to put the broom away and stepping into the utility room, he pulled on his coat and toboggan kept in there, bracing himself for the cold.

Grabbing his spade and the rusting gray bucket, he went down the uneven steps to the ground, eyes lowered, trying not to look at the unkempt mess in the backyard. After she was gone, he had neglected it, allowing it to become overgrown and each spring the perennials fought with weeds and dead growth for a piece of the sun. The cracks in the cement path he'd made were now home to dandelions and grass, whose dried brown remnants were now flattened against the concrete, bland and lifeless. Dead vines and the stalks of dead hollyhocks, gray with age, almost hid the stark gray stones of the walls completely. One of the taller stalks had fallen over, lying partly across the walk. He stepped over it carefully. It shamed him when he thought about how much work they'd put into it, but it was all he could do to go into the greenhouse. The yard would break him.

He followed the walk until it ended and stepped onto the dying grass. Their house sat at the end of the dead end street behind which several acres of untouched land remained. It stretched past their house at the end of the street, making an 'L' there and extending on past the house across from theirs. The land was mostly wooded; he often

trekked into the woods to search for tree nuts and persimmons. They'd even had a good sized garden off to the side of their house filled with tomatoes, squash, and cucumbers among other things. There were a couple fields between wooded spots throughout the properties and he'd even made a path back through there with the old, red tractor he bought from an elderly neighbor several years back. The creek formed a boundary between the backyard and the woods. The two of them had gotten a kick out of exploring the land that came with the house, taking in the magic of the woods that had somehow remained completely untouched by the town that had built up around them. "Let's walk through the fields," he'd say to her. She'd put her arm through his and they'd tease each other and giggle through it all.

After the kids were old enough to play outside by themselves, he built the wall around the yard. He told them it was to keep the bad people out, but mostly it was to keep the kids in. Snakes, wild animals, poison ivy; Dale and Vicki had a knack for finding trouble. Every year, he'd kill at least one cotton mouth when checking his minnow traps in the creek; if he was close enough, he'd grab them by their tails and snap their bodies like a wet towel, splattering their heads against the rocks. If not, he'd leave them be and hoped they'd do the same for him. The last thing he needed was one of his kids or their friends getting bitten by a poisonous snake. He neared the edge of the hill and could hear the water running over the rocks on the other side of the wall.

As the field began to slope downward, he could see the old fashioned apple tree and he took slow, careful steps across the wet ground as he headed toward it. The tree hadn't flowered in years, but it still had leaves in the spring and summer, so he knew it wasn't dead. The tree had been hers. She'd walk to it every day in spring to smell and

admire the blooms and once the fruit began to ripen, she'd pick the misshapen little apples from the ground and branches, loading up the front of her shirt. She'd peel and slice some of them, laying them out on towels to dry on the deck for dried apple pies; there was always fresh apple crisp on the table while they were in season and the rest she cooked down into apple butter. He was pretty sure there were still some jars of the brown butter in the basement, but he couldn't bring himself to go down and check.

As he reached the bottom of the hill, the tree rose up before him, looming over his head like an angry god at judgment. It was gnarled and twisted, a withered hand growing out of the ground, and the dark branches reached up eerily into the overcast sky. A cold burst of wind whirled and thrashed around him and once again, he thought of Dante's Satan, stuck in ice and flapping his wings. The tongue writhed under his belly as the teeth grazed and cut into his back. His skin crawled. The wind rustled the woods and he heard snapping twigs. The woods themselves seemed to be alive, crawling closer and closer to peek at him over the wall. He shuddered as the cold air froze his bones and woke up "ol' Arthur," sending pain through his joints, forcing him to remember what he had come to do.

Flexing his aching fingers, he sat the bucket down where he'd left off last week. Small mounds of red clay earth lay from the tree outward in straight lines, the previous weeks' shorter than the ones to their left. Every week he started by the trunk of the tree and worked outward, always on his knees so the cold dampness of the ground could soak into his jeans. He pushed the spade into the red clay, pulled it back out and plunged it down again, using the spade's shape to guide him as he made smooth, circular holes, demanding perfection. He took the head of a Black-eyed Susan from the bucket; a third

of the petals had fallen off of one side and the rest were limp and darkening. Gently he held it, his fragile, decaying child, and said his goodbye. He pressed his lips to the purplish, brown center, kissing it before placing it in the hole, making sure that it faced up, looking toward the sun. A few of the loose petals were dropped in before he filled the hole and he did this for every flower, the edge of each hole the spade's length from the one before it. There were thirteen this week, two more than the last.

Once he finished, he sat back and stretched his legs, massaging his stiff knees as best he could. His knuckles still ached. The wind had died down while he worked and he relaxed in the quiet; the monsters were satisfied, letting him rest for a moment. He leaned back on his hands and looked up as a small gray shape appeared at the crest of the hill. The old tomcat slithered down the slope as he watched, silently moving toward the east corner of the wall. It stopped at the bottom of the hill and stared at the old man, unblinking for a long time, before it finally looked away and trotted to the stone wall. "Where you goin', Tom?" he asked as the cat pushed his head into the dense foliage of the dried vines. The cat looked back at him once more and then disappeared into the wall. "There must be a hole," he thought.

The old man picked himself up off the ground slowly, stretching his bones carefully on his way up. He walked to the back wall and followed it to the corner where he saw the cat disappear. Near the ground, there was a small opening in the dense gray vines where the cat had slipped through. A shrill, bone-chilling cry came from the other side. "Tom?" he called, but he was met with silence. Running his hand down the dead growth where the hole was, he slid his hand into the opening. He couldn't feel the stone and pushed his hand in further. Nothing. "Huh," he said, getting back down on his knees.

He bent down close to the ground, trying to see where the hole was, but all he saw was darkness, a wall of solid black nothingness lay behind the dead growth. There was no reason he shouldn't be able to see through, he thought. He peeked over the wall. It looked normal; the grass was still mostly green on that side as it made its way to the creek. On the other side of the creek, the green gave way to the browns of the woods. Bending back down, he tugged at the dead growth as the vines clung to the wall desperately, unwilling to let go as he pulled against them. He yanked and tugged at them individually, using his feet to stomp permanent bends into the stalks as he held them down. Sweat dripped down his brow and the back of his neck and his hands were quickly becoming raw from the effort. Every stalk and vine that he pulled down revealed the same dead black space. Once he finally cleared a hole big enough for a man to climb through, he poked at it hesitantly. His finger slipped past the surface along with his hand, then his wrist. A faint, worried "Henry! Henry!" drifted over the hill and he looked back toward the house, his view blocked by the gnarled tree. Another scream sounded from the other side of the wall and a shot of panic went down his spine. Taking one final look back to the top of the hill toward the house, the old man stepped into the darkness.

CHAPTER 2

He'd seen a spider, he was sure of it, even though it'd only been out of the corner of his eye. Tory cursed as he looked through the papers and books stacked in his office at the university. They didn't usually come here and it startled him. He peeked behind his filing cabinet and the bookshelf, then under his desk, but there was no sign of the spider. Sighing, he sat back down at the desk. It was past time for them to show up, but he had hoped, just as he always did, that they wouldn't this time.

They weren't ordinary spiders. He wasn't that jumpy a person. No, these were unique to Tory. They were blue, every shade of blue imaginable, and it hadn't taken him long to realize that he was the only one who could see them. They first appeared when he was a teenager, maybe 15 or 16. He couldn't remember exactly, but he was glad that he'd had the wherewithal at the time to keep his mouth shut. Tory, by nature, was one to think before acting; whenever he saw the spiders as a kid, he would wait to see if anyone else noticed them. Once, he saw one crawl across the television. It was monstrous, the size of a softball at least, but no one in his family so much as blinked. They were watching Jeopardy and the spider's body blocked the clues and Alex Trebek's face. Tory remembered looking at his family and being horrified that they didn't see what he saw and then was equally frightened to think that he was the only one who saw them. He understood well enough that if he told his family, he'd either be brushed off or hauled to

a doctor, neither of which would be particularly pleasant for him, so he kept his mouth shut.

Tory at least had a means of dealing with them, one he'd found quite by accident. One day, he painted a blue painting. It was a memory, one that he couldn't place or piece together, but the image was so clear, he had to paint it. By that point, he saw the spiders nearly constantly, crawling up walls, across the floor, sometimes on other people, but never on himself. They followed him to school, to his soccer games, and the house was always filled with them. They even left prints, from time to time, of their little feet on walls and furniture, tiny blue trails that only he could see. When he finished that first blue painting, they disappeared. There wasn't a trace of the creatures to be found and he wondered if he'd just imagined it all, that he was having some sort of eccentric artist moment like he had been taught about in school. Van Gogh cut off his ear, Tory saw painted spiders. That excuse worked well enough for a while, but it had outlived its novelty. The relief he felt after they were gone had almost made their presence worth it.

It didn't last, of course, but it was better than nothing. At first, it kept the spiders at bay for quite some time, but over the past few years, the time between paintings and sightings had shrunk severely. Most times, it lasted a couple of weeks, but there were times that it didn't last a day. It'd been a month this time and he'd gotten a little hopeful. Oh well, he thought. There was nothing to be done about it anyway.

Still, that the thing had shown up in his office unnerved him. They mostly stayed in his house and occasionally in the studio he had on the third floor of his friend's gallery. He'd extorted the space from Kerri with a large donation for start-up and a promise to help out when she needed him. She already took care of his work, managing his website

and taking care of sales, with a commission, of course. He was pretty sure she even ran several social media accounts for him, although those were mostly for the fans of the comic books he drew with his friend, Ian.

He didn't mind the spiders so much in the studio. That's where he kept all the blue paintings anyway. Home was where they'd appeared in the first place and they'd followed him with every move. Maybe they'd been in the usual places and he just hadn't seen them. The start of a semester always took up a lot of his time and attention. He could've been distracted and the little bastards got desperate. Well, whatever the reason, he knew he had a long night ahead of him. He wouldn't get out of class until six, but he wouldn't be able to paint until it was dark and most people were home. It just never worked before that with these paintings. The world had to be still, at least more still than it was during the day.

A little after 10:00, he pulled up to the gallery, circling the block once to make sure Kerri wasn't there. He didn't like seeing her before he started on these paintings. Whenever he worked on them, she worried about him, which made him uncomfortable. Kerri had gotten farther with Tory than anyone else, seeing through him and the "I'm fine" performance that he put on early on in their friendship. There had even been a moment when he thought he might be in love with her; she'd gotten that close. Of course, he hadn't really been in love with her, at least not romantically. One could be in love with a person as a friend, he supposed.

After he locked the door behind him, he made his way up the stairs in the dark. He was greeted by the musty smell that permeated the third floor. It was a strangely

comforting smell to him and he was glad that it hadn't gone away after they'd cleaned the building up. The brightness of the overhead lighting jarred the image in his mind that he had to paint; just seeing the stairway lit up brought him back into reality and he couldn't deal with the spiders in this reality. One too many times, he'd been left with no image to paint at all, him and the spiders both becoming restless. The little bastards were demanding and finicky; he'd learned to be careful. Turning on the dim light he'd installed in the studio, he carefully set up his things, laying out his paints, all blue, and began to work.

There were days when Tory wondered if something inside him was trying to paint the whole world blue. Various shades of blue covered every canvas in his studio above the gallery, even though Kerri bitched about the mess. It wasn't so much messy as crowded. Canvases leaned against the walls and were stacked on shelves, ten deep in places. Bitching is love, she had told him. He suspected that she just liked to bitch. Or she was really sick of blue.

The sounds of the brush against the canvas cut through the silence in the room as he worked. He didn't show these to her anymore. The room wasn't locked; if she really wanted to see them, she could. It wasn't even that he liked the color. He did, but it was deeper than that. All that was in him was blue; he was made of it. That he knew for certain, although he never could explain it properly. It was the sort of thing buried deep in his core. He knew it as well as he knew his own name. Kerri and Ian had both questioned him about it, but he knew they wouldn't understand. He wasn't even sure he did. Maybe he just didn't have the right words. Ian often went with him to the art store when they lived together; of course he'd notice the amount of blue paint Tory bought.

Tory told him, "I just like blue." When Kerri had asked him why he painted so many of these paintings, though, he was more honest. He told her he had to, that he didn't have a choice. She had looked at him as though he were insane. He shrugged it off as artist eccentricity and she seemed to accept that. At any rate, she had a whole room at the front of the gallery devoted to his non-blue paintings and that kept her happy enough most of the time, especially since they sold well.

Maybe they worried her, the hundreds of variations of the same painting that had filled the room over the past few years. Maybe she thought he was crazy. He couldn't blame her if she did. He had wondered about himself when they were in his home. They spoke to him, haunted him. The images followed him through the house. Blue arms reached out for him as he walked down the hall and into different rooms; once, a hand had reached out and stroked Ian's hair and face for a solid five minutes as they watched TV. Sometimes, a blue figure would act as a reflection, mimicking every move he made. It was always humanoid, as though Tory had painted some strange blue ghosts into existence. Even in college, when he and Ian were roommates, it was all he could do to act normal when Ian was around and the paintings were awake.

He heard the bell on the front door go off and looked at his watch. It was well after midnight. After a few moments, the clacking of heels made their way toward the third floor room where he was painting, followed by a faint knock. He laid his brush down carefully and opened the door.

"Hey, hot stuff," he said, stepping out of the way so Kerri could come in. She was wearing a black cocktail dress, red pumps, and pearls. "Where's Claude?"

“It wasn't a date. I was at the fundraiser for local artists. The one you were supposed to go to with me.”

She looked at him disapprovingly over her black framed glasses. He'd forgotten and winced internally.

“I never said I was going.”

“Yeah, well, it helps get the checks signed.”

“My sour face works better than yours? I doubt that.”

“Sour? Please. The ladies love your pretty face. The men too.”

“I'm not nice to them.”

“Some people love the eccentricities of artists.”

“I'm eccentric now?”

“No, but rich old white people with too much money like to think that. In fact, if you could be more of an asshole at these things, we'd probably make bank.”

“I'll see what I can do.”

She slipped past him and examined the painting he was working on, the sweet, floral scent of her perfume covering the smell of paint and the mustiness of the room.

“It's late.”

“I know.” He didn't like to watch her look over the canvas. It made him nervous.

She turned back to him, her eyes a little softer than before. “So why are you here so late on a Wednesday?”

“Nothing in particular.”

“Hm.” She glanced at the painting again before walking toward him and gently patting his arm. “Don't stay too late,” she said, heading for the door.

“Give me a second to clean up and I'll walk you out.”

“You don't have to. I'm right out front.”

“I know. But I will anyway.” The spell was already broken. He knew he wouldn't get anything else done tonight.

Kerri set the alarm and locked up behind them as they stepped onto the sidewalk. A chill had finally settled over Louisville after a hot September, the overcast sky welcome after a summer of scorching sun.

“You know, if you really want to capitalize on our best assets, you should wear a kimono. Then you'd be a real Oriental princess. That'll get all the old men in a rush to give you money.”

Kerri turned from her car door and cast a sharp look at Tory. “You're not funny, mister. And you'll wipe that shit-eatin' grin off your face if you want me to let you off the hook for tonight.”

“My apologies, madam,” he said, giving a deep, gentlemanly bow.

“That's better.” She smiled.

Driving home, all he could think about was the emptiness of the streets. It made him strangely sad. Obviously, he knew people were just home asleep, but he felt as though the world had been abandoned. People weren't out; they weren't moving or talking. Everyone was tucked away in their darkened houses. They may as well have been dead. He couldn't even bring himself to turn on the radio. Who would be listening anyway? It was too lonely to think about. There was some relief, at least, when he pulled into his driveway.

The darkness in his house startled him a bit. Apparently, he'd forgotten to leave a light on. It was all consuming and he quickly turned on a lamp, driving the shadows back into the corners. He picked up the cell phone he'd left on the couch. There was a text from Ian. 'Tomorrow?' it asked. He texted back a quick 'of course' and headed up stairs to get ready for bed.

The paint was arms, hands, reaching for him, grabbing him, trying to pull him under. He sat up with a gasp. There wasn't much he feared more than the feeling of suffocating and the little bastards took advantage of that every time he didn't finish the painting or attempted to ignore them. Nightmares were his punishment. This time, a hand had covered his mouth, while another pinched his nose shut; something heavy had been sitting on his chest. He would rather have had the spiders crawling all over his home and office, leaving little blue footprints all over his life than suffer through those dreams.

Climbing out of bed, he went into the bathroom and undressed, wiping the sweat from his body with the towel he kept on the back of the door. He looked in the mirror; his wet hair looked black, especially since his skin had paled from the nightmare. After towel drying his hair, he leaned against the vanity. His ears rang with his racing heartbeat and he took a series of deep breaths until it began to slow and the color returned to his face. Changing into dry clothes, he headed downstairs and took the whisky from the cabinet. The portion he poured was more than generous and he gulped it down, making a face. It burned his throat and belly and the last swallow he took threatened to come back up, leaving him in a coughing fit. He wasn't sure if it was from the taste or the dream. Maybe it was a combination of both. He wiped his eyes. The interruption

would be costly. It wasn't enough just to finish the painting. He'd have to paint a new one when the spiders came back. If he was lucky, they'd come back today. If not, he'd need a new bottle.

CHAPTER 3

Henry lay on his back and struggled for his breath. The hole had been under his bathroom sink this time, and it had been quite a struggle to fit under that. At least there's not a vanity up there anymore, he thought, sitting up. Checking out the room around him, he found himself in a place he had been before. It was the cabin he'd rented for their 10th anniversary, back in '78. It looked exactly as it had then, same setup, same rust-orange couch, and even the same brown glass ashtray was setting on the side table next to the couch, a half-smoked Virginia Slim cigarette perched in the divot, still lit, the smoke floating lazily toward the ceiling. He looked closer; on the filter was a ring of pink lipstick.

The thudding of his heart against his chest made his ears ring. Shaking, he managed to pull himself up from the floor and into the matching orange chair that sat adjacent to the couch. Cold sweat pooled on his forehead and he wiped it away with his shirt. He checked his pulse. No, he wasn't dead; that he was sure of. But this place and that lit cigarette were a sick joke. In his own house, he knew well enough that the visions of her, her voice, and the traces of her perfume were all in his head. Beth was dead. She didn't exist anywhere on Earth and he had accepted that. She died, he lived. Period. That's all there was too it. But what if? He didn't know the rules in this place or where it even was.

Still, hope in this situation was foolish. Even if this was the land of the dead, if this was the place she chose to come to in death, her own personal heaven, it wasn't as if he could stay here. To see Beth for even a moment, knowing that he would have to go back, he didn't want any part of it. Before, going through the holes had just been a curiosity; they were just something to explore. Now it was personal, painful. Closing his eyes, he wiped the tears that were welling up instead of letting them spill over on their own and took deep breaths, forcing himself to calm down.

After several minutes, when his heart rate slowed and his hands stopped shaking, he stood and began to walk through the room. The couch faced the old black and white television; he traced his finger up and down the rabbit ears on top of the TV. Pulling his fingers back, he was surprised to see that they weren't dusty. Rather than being preserved for more than 30 years, it seemed that the room had just been taken out of the past itself. He turned the knob on the front of the TV. He got snow and he tried each number on the dial, getting snow each time, before turning the box off again.

He looked through the books on the bookcase, all classics, something he had found incredibly generic when they'd stayed there. There was something about it now that made sense. Not one book on the shelf was printed after 1900. He remembered the man on the phone when he rented the place saying something that the cabin had been built in the late 1800s; there was a certain air in the place, despite the décor, that made the place timeless. Maybe it had existed outside of time from the beginning, he thought, and he'd been touched by its magic ever since. Maybe that was why it looked like she was still there.

To his left past the bookcase was the record player. He remembered being told that the cabinet was custom made. The turntable sat snugly on top with two long shelves below holding records. Getting down on his knees, he began thumbing through the albums: The Carpenters, Patsy Cline, Billy Holiday, Carol King, Gordon Lightfoot, Elvis Presley, Carly Simon, James Taylor, Hank Williams; they all brought up feelings of nostalgia. He and Beth spent that weekend so many years ago listening to these records, dancing, making love, no kids or anything else to interrupt them.

He'd never been so in love as when he met her; not even his first love as a teenager had hit him as hard. She moved into the house across the street from his in 1964, newly divorced with a young child. Beth was beautiful. Her long red hair and blue eyes had done him in the moment he saw her. He first helped her with repairs when her roof started leaking a couple of months after she moved in. It took him almost a year to convince her to go on a date with him and two more years after that before she agreed to marry him. She often said his best trait was his persistence.

As he pulled the records out to look at them, he found himself holding Tom Waits' *Closing Time* from 1973. Of all the records they had owned, this one was their favorite. It came out the year their daughter was born and it had their song on it, "Little Trip to Heaven." They'd danced to that song so many times. Standing, he slid his fingers across the cover before taking the record from its sleeve and placing it on the turntable. He turned the player on and set the needle; even now, he remembered exactly where the song was. The opening piano chords were so beautiful, happy. It wasn't the traditional slow song so many couples had; "Little Trip to Heaven" was bright and a little upbeat, perfect for dancing. He hadn't listened to this song since before she died. He just

couldn't. In the 14 years since she'd died, he'd forgotten how cheerful the song was and he took a step forward, raising his left hand as though he were leading her, and began to dance.

Swaying, he closed his eyes and stepped to the beat. He felt a warmth in his hand and then against his body. A cheek pressed against his cheek. He didn't have to open his eyes; he could smell her shampoo, the faint, sweet scent of her perfume under that. The way she felt against him, a perfect fit, it was as if they'd been together all this time. Slowly, he opened his eyes. She was there, right there in his arms, 38 years old again, as beautiful as ever. A bit of gray showed in the front of her hair, earned gray, she'd called it. Beth looked up at him, her bright blue eyes locking on his, and she smiled that smile that let him know that she loved him. He noticed his own hand holding hers, young and tan again. Tilting his head downward, he placed his forehead against hers. Their movements slowed, still swaying; he closed his eyes and leaned in. The kiss was warm, so warm, and he felt the tears begin rolling down his face. Joy and loss all at once; he didn't know what to do, so he just danced and cried.

When the song ended, he felt her pull away from him, and he followed her as she moved down the hall. Looking down at himself as he walked, he was 70 again, with spotted hands and belly a little bigger than he liked. Raising his eyes, he saw her move so quickly that she was at the end of the hall before he started down it. He watched as she turned left and disappeared through the wall. Moving quickly, he came to the place she'd disappeared; there was a door. This was the outside wall of the cabin, he thought. There shouldn't be a door here. He turned the knob slowly and peeked his head through.

There were stairs that led to another door at the bottom. After closing that door behind him, he made his way down the stairs to the next one.

Henry pushed the door open and stepped into a dimly lit hallway. It looked old. The floor creaked beneath his feet as he began walking, his hand sliding against the wall. Every few feet, an old light dangled from the ceiling, illuminating a small circle around him with a yellow light, making a path of small lit circles all the way down the hallway. There were no doors, save for the one he'd come in through, but he could hear noises coming from outside the walls, industrial sounds, as though he were in some sort of factory or perhaps a construction site. He hadn't heard those sounds at the cabin before and he wondered if it was time or space he was moving through. It could be both, he reasoned, continuing down the hall.

Occasionally, he heard voices shouting over the noise, but too muffled for him to understand the words. The hallway was long, but he kept walking. As he made his way from one circle of light to the next, he noticed an opening in front him, a room at the end of the hall. The light coming from that room was different, a fluorescent bulb, probably. Henry walked faster and as he came nearer the room, he could see the light flickering. By the time he reached the doorway, the hallway had grown quiet and the sounds he heard now came from the room itself. He stepped inside as quietly as possible, so as not to disturb the figure in the room.

A man stood in front of the switchboard among the tangle of black wires that poured from their respective holes in the board onto the floor. The sleeves of his dingy lab coat were pushed up to just below his elbows. Oblivious to Henry, who was standing behind him, the man was hunched over with a cord in his hand, his head moving back

and forth, looking between two spots on the switchboard. A small shower of sparks shot up from the top of the board with a pop and a hiss. Henry jumped slightly and bumped into the wobbly table next to him. The man at the board froze for a moment, before turning his head and looking at Henry curiously through thick round glasses that enlarged his eyes.

“I didn't see you there,” he said slowly with a gravelly voice that was all too familiar to Henry, turning back to his work. “Make yourself comfortable.” He went back to the board and after a moment, stuck the cord in one of the holes, straightened his back, and waited, watching the cord.

Henry stood dumfounded. That was Tom Waits in front of him. A very Renfield-esque Tom Waits, but there was no mistaking that it was the singer. He'd thought nothing in this place could surprise him after what had happened in the cabin, but clearly he'd been wrong. He made a quick promise to whatever god ruled this place that he wouldn't make any more assumptions like that. He didn't want another surprise today, his heart couldn't take it. It had been a rough day for him. Tom, satisfied that he made the right choice, turned back to Henry, who was still standing next to the table.

“Ah, where are my manners?” the man croaked. He dragged a wobbly chair over and placed it next to Henry before grabbing an ancient rolling stool for himself. “Have a seat.”

Henry's eyes were wide with recognition. He sat down hesitantly, convinced that this time he must be dreaming. Why else would the singer be here?

“You hungry? Want something to drink? Don't be shy!”

“No, thank you,” Henry answered quietly, still scanning the strange objects surrounding him. There were broken wind-up toys laid out and open, as though they were waiting for surgery, clockwork parts neatly lined up next to them. He saw test tubes and beakers filled with various colored and bubbling liquids, some over Bunsen burners, others bubbling of their own accord, and hand tools, a few of which Henry recognized, many that he didn’t. He particularly wondered what a switchboard operator would need with such a large scalpel, but he didn’t have the courage to ask.

“So, you’re probably wondering what’s going on here.” Another pop and hiss came from the board. The man did a quick spin on his stool and raised his eyebrows at him. “Hm?”

“Yes.”

“It’s quite simple, believe it or not. I make connections, kind of like a telephone operator. Do they still have those?” He gestured animatedly as he spoke.

“I-I don’t know. I don’t think so.” The real singer would know that, right? So the man was a copy, Henry thought. Or perhaps a familiar image to make him more comfortable.

“Well, anyway,” Tom went on, “each time I put a cord in one of the holes, it makes a connection. All day long, I take a cord from one hole and put it in another. That’s my lot, moving cords. What’re ya gonna do?” he shrugged. “The connections, though, they’re the real stuff. When the cord lands in its new home, this little line of information shoots into the...the,” he waved his hand in the air a few times, “well, it shoots off into somewhere, searching and sniffing around for the right direction. You with me so far?”

Henry nodded.

“Good. Now, it sniffs around, right? It goes right, left, up, down,” he said, moving his head like a bloodhound on the trail, sniffing loudly. “Once it finds the scent, it makes a bee line to it, making kind of a spark,” he said, using his hands to mimic an explosion. “Now, this spark, it flashes a few times, kind of warming up the source, you know, it hasn’t been used for a while.” Seeing the blank expression on Henry’s face, he paused. “Like a diesel engine. It takes a minute to get going. Anyway, once it’s warmed up, the light becomes solid. The connection is made.” The man took a deep breath and sighed. “Well, that’s what they tell me anyway. Alls I see is the board,” he said, pointing behind him.

“So, who are you?” Henry asked.

“Me?” The man looked surprised. “Well,” he paused, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, “I’ve never been asked that before. The big guy said “make connections,” so I make connections.” He looked back at the board, then turned back around and smiled. “I guess I’m the Operator.”

“The Operator,” Henry repeated. “Right. Uh, I’m—“

“Henry,” he interrupted. “I know who *you* are.”

“How do you—“

“I know everyone,” Tom said with a grin. “For instance, you’re Henry Clarke. You’re 70 years old, father of two, Dale, adopted, Vicki, who’s yours, and you have a few grandkids that you see on the holidays and a couple of times in the summer. You used to be a prison guard at the Western Kentucky Correctional Facility, but you retired three years ago.” He paused for a moment looking at Henry. “You’re a widower.”

Henry stared at Tom in disbelief. “How do you know all that?”

“I know everything.”

“Are you,” he paused, “are you God?”

“God? No. Just a humble operator, like I said. Anyway,” Tom waved his hand in front of him as though he were fanning something away, “none of that stuff is important.”

“Then what is?”

“I can’t really tell you that. It’s one of those self-discovery things.”

“Then what’s the point of bringing me here?” Henry asked. He was quickly becoming annoyed.

“Bring? Did you not come of your own free will?”

“I came through the holes. You put them there, didn’t you?”

“You chose to come through. No one brought you.”

Henry’s face turned red with frustration and he stood up to leave.

“Now wait,” Tom said, “there’s no need to get in a huff about things. Sit down.”

The authority in Tom’s voice made Henry feel like a child and he was ashamed that he’d gotten so upset. He sat back down.

“Listen, Hank,” Tom began gently, “you’ve had a rough day, so your frustration is understandable.”

Henry took a deep breath. “Why is she here?” Henry asked, looking at the floor.

“That’s an excellent question.”

“You don’t know?”

“If you really want to know, you’ll have to ask her.” He leaned in toward Henry, patting his shoulder. “But I suspect that you won’t need to, if you think about it hard enough.” After giving Henry a moment to collect himself, Tom stood. “It’s almost time for you to go back, but there’s something I want to talk to you about first.”

“What is it?” Henry asked, finally raising head.

“That greenhouse you built. You should tear it down.”

“What? Why?”

“It’s not healthy.”

“It is too. I take care of the flowers.”

“That’s not what I mean. That greenhouse will possess you if you let it. I’ve seen your ritual,” he added, turning back to the board.

Before Henry could respond, he found himself suddenly on his front porch, flat on his bottom with his hand in the tomcat’s water bowl.

CHAPTER 4

“Children and monkeys like high places,” Tory said, as he stood on the pedestrian walkway in the middle of the 2nd Street Bridge, looking across the water at the Louisville skyline. It was cold and gray, the wind bitter against his skin. There was always wind at the river, especially this time of year. He loved the feel of it across his skin, through his hair. It almost sufficed for human touch. Taking in the dark winter grays that covered the city, his eyes were relaxed, not tense and pinched as they usually were. Twenty minutes on the bridge and he was more relaxed than he had been in weeks.

Tory watched the river. The rushing wind and calm water were almost hypnotic and he wanted to be a part of them. Or maybe, since he knew he couldn't really become part of the wind or the river, maybe he could just sleep outside with them for a night or two. He could get a few blankets and just curl up under a tree or something. Worried by his thoughts, he sent a quick text to Ian, asking him for a ride. Even if he did decide to sleep out here, would he stay warm enough to actually sleep? Where could he sleep that he wouldn't be seen? And if he was seen, especially by cops, what would he say? He'd probably get locked up for being crazy. They'd at least want a psychiatric evaluation. That sort of story might be good publicity for the books and his art in general, but he doubted the university would look upon it favorably. Crazy's okay for artists, not so much for teachers.

“Christ. What kind of moron thinks about shit like this?”

Tory leaned over the rail, looking into the murky brown mess of the Ohio River. Snake-like wood drifted lazily, black heads bobbing above the surface as though they needed air. It was rancid shit, this river, but the wind blowing above it made waves across the surface and it was beautiful and he felt sorry for the people trapped in their cars. A strange, mad smile touched his lips for a moment and a sound bubbled up from inside him, tumbling out awkwardly as a laugh.

The sound continued to come out of him, caught by the wind and carried off to who knew where. He leaned out further, letting the rail dig into his hips, and reached down until he could touch the bridge on the other side. He lifted his feet up, fooling himself that this was what it felt like to fly. Still laughing, he lifted his hands just off the concrete, suspending himself completely across the ledge. A car horn startled him and he nearly toppled forward. He scrambled back up with a string of curses, taking deep breaths until his heart calmed down.

After a few minutes, the fear turned to courage and he leaned out again. That bubbling laugh started to fill his mouth again; he felt mischievous and let the sound fall into the air. Spreading his arms, he leaned out as far as he could, keeping his eyes on the horizon. His shoulders shook with laughter and he brought his arms back to the rail. Upright once again, he waited patiently for the man walking toward him.

“What are you doing?” Ian asked, approaching cautiously as though Tory were some wild animal about to strike. The words didn't quite enter his ears, but bounced around the edges, cautious. Ian looked at him like he was crazy.

“Nothing.” He laughed again and leaned back out over the railing.

“Stop that.”

“Why? It's fine.”

“You could fall.”

“I won't.” That bizarre laughter fell out of him again and Ian grabbed the back of his coat, yanking him upright. “Sorry.” Tory hid his upturned lips behind his hand, giggling.

“Jesus, Tory. You scared me to death. What's wrong with you?”

“Sorry.” He couldn't stop smiling. “The 2nd Street Bridge is a good place for walking.”

“You weren't walking.” Ian's face was all triangles, from his eyebrows to his lips, all pulled harshly down. “Jesus. I thought you were going to jump.”

“I thought about it.” Alarm crossed Ian's face and Tory did his best to be serious. “But the river's filthy.”

“It's not funny, Tory. I was worried about you.”

“Oh, come on. I was just playin'. Sorry I worried you.”

“Fine. Whatever.” Ian looked out across the water and sighed. “You hungry?”

“Yeah.”

“You're probably cold. You were out here for a long time, right?”

“Mm.”

“I've got a cup of coffee for you in the car.”

“Aw. You're sweet. I could fall for a man like you.”

Ian rolled his eyes. “Stop that.” They walked back toward Main Street. “You play around too much. I can't tell if you're serious or not.”

“About jumping?”

“Among other things.”

“I won't. Promise.”

“But that's just jumping.”

“I won't kill myself,” Tory said.

“Promise?”

“Promise.” He did want to promise. It's the thought that counts, they say. Down the side of Ian's neck, Tory saw a trail of blue footprints. They'd gotten to Ian now too. He sighed. “I was born on Thursday.”

“What?”

“Thursday's child. I was born on a Thursday.”

Ian looked at him questioningly. “Right. You were born on Thursday.”

“I have far to go.” How much further? he wondered. He felt like he'd been trudging for ages.

“Right.”

“It's a poem. ‘Monday's Child.’”

“Oh. Right. I've heard it before.”

“Which are you?”

“Tuesday, I think.”

“Then you're full of grace.”

“Not hardly,” he snorted.

“Sure you are.” Tory smiled as Ian turned to look at him.

“Are you okay? I mean, really okay?”

“Yeah. I'm just tired.”

“Then you should go home.”

“After lunch.”

“Sure.”

They were quiet as they took the last step off the bridge, back on the solid ground of the Main Street sidewalk, turning left past Bearno's Pizza to Ian's car.

“Do you ever forget that the past had color?” Tory asked. “For the life of me, I can't see it in anything except black and white.”

“What?”

“I'm just asking.”

“I don't know. I never thought about it.” He unlocked Tory's door first before going around to his own. “It's probably because of pictures,” Ian said, getting in. “But they had color. Where's your truck?”

“UofL.”

“You didn't walk all the way down here, did you?”

“I took a bus.”

“Why?”

“I like the bus. You don't have to think about anything. The noise from the engine, surrounded by either strangers or empty seats; it's nice sometimes. Not terribly convenient though.”

“I guess that's why you called me?”

“You got it.” That was a lie, but he'd worried Ian enough for one day. “How'd you get here so fast?”

“I was at the library.”

“The main branch?”

“Yeah. I was looking up some stuff.”

“I thought maybe you were having lunch with Smith or something.”

“We’re getting dinner after she gets off work.”

Tory gave Ian a congratulatory slap on the shoulder as Ian turned his car onto Third Street. After eating lunch at a café near the university, Ian dropped Tory off. Tory looked at his watch. He was supposed to teach class at six, which meant he had four hours to kill before then. Not today, he thought, heading to office to send an email to his class, telling them he was sick. He didn’t feel like being there. All he wanted to do was go home. He also typed and printed up two notes, one of which he taped to his office door and the other to the door of his classroom, and went home.

When he got there, he didn’t bother with the lights. He wanted it quiet and dark. This was a day where he couldn’t stand anymore stimuli. No people, no sound, no light. Even television would be too much of an intrusion. Coming in, he dropped his things next to the door and pulled his shoes off before heading to the bedroom to change clothes. Maybe a nap would make him feel better, he thought, and he climbed into bed and, turning on a fan to drown out any stray noises, closed his eyes.

He was woken up by knocking. The knocks were shockingly close, as though every wall was being hit, not just the front door. They seemed to ring through the walls like a bell, loud, but gentle. It hadn’t startled him the way he would have expected it to, but instead lulled him out of sleep the way his mother had when he was a child. Climbing out of bed, he turned on all the lights as he made his way to the door.

Tory stared at the man through the screen door for a moment, shocked. The face and voice he recognized as Tom Waits. He knew, of course, that there was no way that the singer could possibly be standing on his doorstep, despite the obvious evidence that he was.

“Are you going to let me in or what?” Tom asked, his voice just as gravelly as it sounded in interviews.

Tory opened the door, taking a step back as the older man walked past him. He stammered, trying to think of something to say.

“Tom,” he said, shaking Tory’s hand. “I guess you’re a little shocked.” He led Tory to the couch and shut the door. “A stranger just inviting himself in and all.”

Tory, still dumfounded, watched Tom go into the kitchen. After a few minutes of rummaging through cabinets and the freezer, the man came back out with a glass of bourbon.

“Here. Drink that. It’ll knock some of the shock off.”

Tory did as he was told and swallowed the contents of the glass in two burning gulps, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand before setting the glass on the coffee table. He could hear a calliope playing a carnival dirge in the background to the beat of a ticking clock.

“So,” he began, pulling over Tory’s computer chair so he could face the younger man, “you had a pretty rough day today.” When Tory didn’t answer, Tom sat back and sighed with frustration. “Conversation requires at least two participants, you know.” He leaned forward in his chair, his arms resting on his knees. “So, bad day.”

“I guess.”

“You guess?”

“I just didn’t feel well.”

“Oh, is that all?” Tom rolled his eyes.

“Yeah,” Tory said, defiant. “I didn’t feel well.”

“Well, at least you still have some fight in ya,” he said and leaned back, swiveling the chair back and forth as he took in the room. His eyes stopped on an enlarged panel from the comic Tory drew, a death scene for one of the characters. The paper was nearly black from shading, the ink heavy on the page. “That’s nice work,” Tom said, gesturing to the picture.

“Thanks.”

“You drew that?”

“Yeah. That’s how I make my living. Drawing comics.”

“This your favorite scene or something?”

Tory hesitated for a moment. “It is.”

“May I ask why?”

“I don’t know. I just think it’s beautiful.”

“Calling your own work beautiful? A little cocky, isn’t it?” Tom smirked.

“Not my work, that part of the story. I didn’t write it, so I don’t think it’s arrogant for me to say that.”

“I see. What’s so beautiful about it?”

“I don’t know.” He didn’t like talking about things like this, but Tom’s gaze didn’t budge; he clearly wasn’t going to allow Tory to leave it at that. Tory took a deep, resigned breath. “Both of these characters, the hero and the guy dying, they’re monsters.

Not beasts, you know, but inhuman, in a way. There are lots of bad people in the comic, but none of them ever admits it. This guy, though, the one in the hero's arms, he knows what he is. He doesn't apologize for his actions, mind you, but he owns up to it. The hero gives him a clean, painless death. It's beautiful."

"Hm." Tom seemed satisfied with that answer and Tory relaxed a little. The man hadn't thought he was strange for finding that scene beautiful. He knew it wasn't much, really, but he felt that he could trust Tom, at least a little bit; he felt understood. They sat quietly for several minutes. It was a comfortable silence. After a few moments, Tory looked up at Tom.

"Can I ask you a strange question?"

"Shoot."

"What's love taste like?" Tory asked.

"How would I know?" Tom cocked an eyebrow.

"Don't you?"

Tom sighed. "I suppose I can imagine."

"Can you chew it?"

"You can chew a lot of things."

"But can you chew love?"

"If you do it right."

"Is it sweet?" Tory leaned forward on the couch, his eyes wide with curiosity.

"It's something. I'm not sure 'sweet' is the word I'd use."

"So what's it taste like?"

The man thought for a minute and made a face. "It's got a wang to it."

“A wang?”

“Yeah. Somewhere between good and weird. Closer to weird. Like polio vaccine.”

“Love tastes like the polio vaccine.”

“Don't be a smartass. It's got a wang to it the same way the polio vaccine has a wang to it.” He took a drag off his cigarette. “Why the sudden interest in love anyway?”

“I've never been loved before. I just wanted to know.”

“Everyone's loved by someone.”

“That's speculation.”

“I'm in your living room and you're worried about speculation?”

“Don't change the subject.”

“Fine.”

“Anyway, it's not something you can tell someone.”

“What isn't?”

“That you've never been loved. They'll think there's something wrong with you,” Tory said. “Even if they like you, they'll suddenly lose interest.”

“Right.”

“Or they'll say something like you just said. Then I won't like them anymore because they can't understand. I'll know they aren't taking me seriously.”

“Is there a point to this? You got someone you want to tell that to?”

“Maybe. I don't know.”

“You think I do?”

“I had to ask.”

“Sorry, Chief. That's not my area.” He looked at Tory's disappointed face and stood up, reaching over the coffee table, and patted Tory's shoulder before sitting back down. “I'd give you a solid answer if I had one.”

“No, I know.”

“Get to know him better,” he said after a moment. “You're a smart guy. Give yourself some time and you'll figure it out.”

“Thanks.”

“So can we move on now? This love stuff is cramping the room. It takes up too much air.”

“Sure.” Tory felt deflated and lay back against the cushions.

“There is a reason that I came to see you,” Tom said as he pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and lit one, then pointing to the clean, green glass ashtray on the side table next to the couch. Tory handed it to him. The smell of tobacco smoke filled the air and Tory was aware of how good it smelled to him. He rubbed the nicotine patch on his arm.

“What did you give him?” Tom asked. His demeanor was changed.

“Who?”

“You know who,” Tom said, his eyes catching Tory's. “The man on the other side of the creek. You gave him something. What was it?”

Tom saw the blankness on Tory's face and sighed.

“You really forgot? Jesus.” He removed his hat and scratched his head. “Man, I come all the way out here to help you and it's for naught.”

“Who asked you to help me?”

“You did.” He placed the hat back on his head. “I suppose you forgot that too.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Christ, boy, on the bridge! You were screamin' at the top of your lungs. I couldn't ignore you if I wanted to.”

“I laughed. I didn't scream.”

“You did. A lot. Very loud.”

“Then how come no one noticed?”

Tom rolled his eyes. “Not out there,” he gestured widely. “You were screaming in here,” he said, slapping his chest with his hand and then tapped his temple. “And in here. Loud as I've ever heard anyone.”

They fell into silence again and Tory's eyes drifted toward the floor, unfocused. Had he been screaming?

The ticking of the clock resounded throughout the house. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick. He had noticed it when Tom first appeared, but now it had a heavy resonance to it, just as the knocking had. Tock. Tick. Tock. It was slow, slower than it should've been and the more he listened to it, tick, tock, tick, tock, the more he was convinced that it wasn't in the house at all, but between his ears. He felt unsteady, wavering, as though his body was only half here.

“What did you mean when you said I gave something away?” His voice was hoarse and weak.

“You can feel it now, eh?”

“Are you the one doing that?”

“It's not a who, it's a where.”

“What does that mean?”

“It's because of where we are. I'm not doing anything.”

“But we're in my house. I'm here all the time.”

Tom sighed again. “You're still not seeing the big picture, Chief. Not here,” he drew out the word and gestured around the room. “It's like the screaming.”

“So it's in my head.”

“No. Listen. You gave something away, a big chunk of yourself, and you gave it to the man across the creek.”

“The man across the creek,” Tory repeated.

“At Hank's house.”

“Hank?”

“Your grandfather, Henry.”

“Why do you call him ‘Hank’?”

“Never mind. Anyway. You gave a piece of yourself away. But it's not like cutting off a body part and handing it to someone. You cut your hand off, give it to a guy. You can still see your hand. It's not like that.”

“I don't get it.”

“Of course not,” Tom said, rolling his eyes again. “Basically, you're only half a person now. You gave away something big, something essential to your being, not a physical part of your body, but a part of your,” he looked around the room for the word, “soul, for lack of a better word.”

“So where is it?”

“The thing you gave away? With the man, I would imagine. The question you should be asking is where are we now?” Tom looked at Tory expectantly.

“Really? You're waiting for me to ask?”

“Yep.”

He sighed. “Where are we now?”

“We're in the other place.”

“Seriously? The other place?”

“Yeah. It isn't where you normally are, so it's in the other place. It's not like there are an infinite number of possibilities.”

“Right.”

“It's either here or there. It can't be anywhere else.”

Tory closed his eyes and breathed a few times before opening them again. Tom was digging under his fingernails with a pocket knife.

“Look, uh, it's a lot to take in,” Tom said. “Don't worry about it too much. Wash your face, go to bed. You'll feel better in the morning.” He stood up and walked into the kitchen. “You care if I fix myself a night-cap?” he asked, leaning back so his head was in the doorway.

Tory shook his head, listening to the ice clinking in the glass. “So, will you be here in the morning?”

“Nah. I'll get out of here before then. I got some stuff to take care of.”

“Somebody else?”

“Jealous?”

“No. I just wondered if other people meet you.”

“Or if I'm just in your head?” Tom walked back into the living room and sat on the couch. “Even if I say 'yes' it could still just be your mind telling you what you want to hear, you know.” He watched Tory for a moment. “You're not crazy. You can hear and see me just fine.” He took a drink and sat his glass on the coffee table. “Besides, I told you things you didn't know. Anyway, your assignment is to remember.”

“And if I can't?”

Tom sighed. “I'll think of somethin'.”

CHAPTER 5

“Are you all right?” Tory asked Jason, after watching Jason push the spaghetti around his plates for the past twenty minutes.

“I’m fine.”

Tory sighed, dropping his fork loudly on his plate. “Have I done something wrong?” Jason didn’t answer. “Is it about last night? You know, I already apologized once. I really did forget that Ian and I already had plans.”

“It’s fine, I said. I’m fine. So just drop it.”

Just drop it, huh, Tory thought. He snorted and shook his head.

Jason’s head snapped toward him. “You want to know why I’m mad?”

“It’s not gonna fix itself, is it? I’ve clearly done somethin’ to piss you off, so yeah, I would like to know.”

“You rarely make the first move. I’m always the one who calls you. If I want to see you, I’m the one who asks you. I kiss you. I hold you. You never do anything to me without my lead. And I never know when I’ll get to see you because you’re always with Ian. And what’s even worse is that you make plans with him all the time. I’ve seen you do it! You never take the initiative with me!”

Tory couldn’t speak. He couldn’t say anything back. He’d done it again, hurt someone without even knowing he was doing it. Same as always. It was the only thing he was really good at. Always, always hurting someone.

“Fuck! At least say something!”

He started and stopped again. “I,” he began, “I don't know what to say,” he said quietly and took a deep breath, trying to brace himself. A large blue spider crawled out from under the bowl of spaghetti in the middle of the table and onto Jason's hand. Tory watched the bug slip under the sleeve of Jason's shirt. Fuck, he thought. He should've known they'd get to Jason too, but he'd gotten cocky, thinking he could beat them. He felt helpless. If he could figure things out, he could fix it. Maybe. He just needed to think.

“Is that it? You just don't have anything to say? That. That too. Always so distant and cold. It's like you don't care about me at all.” Jason got up and grabbed his coat. “I'm going. I need to cool off.” He stopped just before he got to the door. “I won't come back until you call me.” The door slammed behind him.

Tory didn't move, willing his body into perfect stillness, his breath into silence. It was that childhood habit of his, hiding himself in closets or corners and not making a sound. The shadows didn't stir. Perhaps the shock of it all had scared them as well. Listening intently, he heard Jason's car door open and close and he waited anxiously for the car to pull away. The sound of the engine disappeared down the street and he bit his lip, rubbing his thumb in the palm of his opposite hand, in a slow rhythmic pattern, reminding himself that he was still there. With his eyes closed, he forced his body to relax, pushing all of the reaction from his body, first out of his torso, down his legs and arms, and out of the ends of his toes and fingers, leaving them to slink between the floorboards of the old house into the basement. Taking a deep breath, he reached down

and put his shoes on before getting up and grabbing his coat, making sure his keys were in the pocket before heading out the door.

The sterile white light of the security lamp cast a haunted aura over the cabin. Tory was relieved to see only one car in front of the house; he didn't need an audience to make it worse. The shadows seemed to swallow up the yard completely out here, crawling up the walls and burrowing deeply into the corners where the light didn't reach. It wasn't like the city. The lights in the house were off, but it wasn't all that late; he was sure Ian wouldn't be asleep yet, or at least, he wouldn't mind being woken up. He knocked and waited, turning his back to the door to face the light. He jumped when he heard the door open.

"Tory? What's up?" Ian was in pajamas, but he didn't look like he had been asleep. Tory avoided Ian's eyes.

"Were you asleep?"

"No, I was writing. What's up?"

"Am I cold?"

"What?"

"Am I a cold person?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Just answer me."

Ian sighed, running his hands through his short hair, leaving it mussed and standing up on one side. "You really drove all the way here to ask me that?"

"Yeah."

"Why don't you come in?" he asked, stepping back out of the doorway.

“No, that's all right. I'm not gonna stay. Just tell me.”

“I guess. Yeah, sometimes you can come across that way.” The familiar cold shock shot out from his center to the ends of his limbs. He clenched his jaw. “There's nothing wrong with it. It's just part of who you are, you know?”

Tory nodded. “Thanks for being honest,” he said, stepping down off the porch.

“Is this about Jason?”

Tory just gave a wave and walked to his truck.

The whiskey burned as it slid down his throat, lighting a fire in his belly. Sinking into the couch, he slid down into the cushion easily with the effects of the alcohol. It was warm against his back, just like when Jason slept behind him. His chin trembled a little. “Fucking whiskey,” he said, glaring at the bottle on the table. “Makes me sentimental.” His mind was getting fuzzy and he wondered for a moment if he ought to slow down a little. He let his head fall backward against the couch. He watched the lines on the ceiling fade in and out of focus as they swam in circles. They were so silly. He giggled.

The sound of the key in the door broke him out of his amusement. Jason stepped inside and looked down at the nearly empty bottle on the table and back up at Tory.

“Are you drunk?”

“I thought you weren't coming back until I called you.”

“Fuck you, Tory,” Jason said.

“What'd you even come back for?”

“Where did you go?”

“You keeping tabs on me now?”

Tory finished what was left in his glass and bent back down to the coffee table to refill it.

“I came back by to talk to you after I calmed down. You weren't here. Where did you go?”

“For a drive.”

“To Indiana?”

Tory took a drink so he wouldn't have to answer, letting the liquid fill his mouth slowly before finally swallowing.

“That's what I thought.” Jason turned away angrily. “Fuck!” His fists tightened. “It's always him. Christ!” He ran his trembling hand through his hair roughly. “This is so fucked up! I can't have you because of him.”

“What're you talking about?”

“Ian,” he spat. “Ian, Ian, Ian!” Jason turned and grabbed Tory by the shirt, pulling him off the couch, sobering him up. “You're with me, aren't you? So why do you go to him? Huh?”

“Let go,” Tory said, pulling Jason's hands off his shirt. He brushed past him and headed to his bedroom. “I'm done tonight. I'm going to bed.”

“Not yet. Answer my question. Am I not good enough for you? Do I seem untrustworthy?” Jason asked, following Tory.

“Oh, for fuck's sake,” Tory said, sitting on the bed.

Jason grabbed Tory's arm and pulled him roughly toward him until they were eye to eye on the edge of the bed.

“Ow—”

“If you love him so much, why don't you just tell him!” His fingers dug into Tory's arm as Tory tried to pull away.

“What are you talking about?” He said, looking away. He stiffened as though he thought he would be hit.

“Ian. He's all you fucking care about!”

“I'm not—” he began as Jason yanked him closer. Tory pushed back weakly and Jason slid his hand into his hair, forcing Tory to look at him.

“You're not what?” Jason's eyes were fierce.

“I'm not in lo—”

He was cut off by a brutal kiss. Jason kept his grip tight. Tory didn't fight back. Jason pushed him down, kissing him again, this time drawing blood as he bit Tory's bottom lip. He sat up, giving Tory a moment to breathe, and roughly untucked Tory's shirt. A button popped off as Jason yanked it upward. He kept his hand on Tory's shoulder, still holding him down as he unbuckled Tory's belt and tugged his pants off.

CHAPTER 6

It had taken a week for Tory to get Jason to come over. He called and when Jason didn't answer the phone, he sent texts. There was no way Jason could avoid him forever, so he inundated his phone until the man responded. Tory prided himself on learning from his mistakes. He liked Jason; in fact, if asked, he would have said he loved him. Still, now that Jason was standing in his house, just barely inside the door, Tory wondered if it was too late.

Jason still had his coat on and was rocking back and forth, from one foot to the other, looking as though he would bolt as soon as he was given the chance.

"Will you please sit down?" Tory asked. "You're making me nervous."

Jason reluctantly entered the room, still wearing his coat, and sat on the edge of the couch.

"Listen. I, uh, I don't know if we can keep this up after the other night. I lost control," Jason said.

"It's all right."

"It's not, Tory. What I did—I can't ask you to forgive me for that."

"You were frustrated. I made you uncertain. It was just sex—a little rougher than normal—but still sex."

"How can you shrug it off like that?"

"Like what? It's fine, Jason. You didn't hurt me."

"I forced you, Tory! I held you down. I ra—" Jason covered his mouth.

“You raped me? Is that what you were about to say?”

Jason put his face in his hands.

“Let's get something clear,” Tory said firmly. “You did not rape me. Did I say 'no'? Did I push you away? I *let* you fuck me. Period.”

Jason stood up quickly and paced, pushing his hand through his hair roughly the way he did when he was angry. He did that a lot lately, Tory thought.

“Do you even understand how much I hate myself right now?” Jason finally asked. “To think that I could lose control like that, that I could actually force someone—”

Jason fell to the ground roughly as Tory's fist connected with his cheek. Tory was on him before he could get his bearings, flipping him onto his stomach, holding his face to the ground. He couldn't move.

“You did not rape me, Jason. I let you. Is that understood?” Tory waited for a response. “Is that understood?” he asked again, pulling Jason's arm further behind his back.

“Yes.”

“I am not that weak.”

After a few seconds, Tory crawled off of Jason and helped him sit up, holding Jason's face gently in his hands, examining him carefully.

“Your lip's bleeding,” Tory said quietly. “Hang on.” He got up and wet a wash cloth before stepping into the kitchen for some ice. He poked around in the freezer, settling for a bag of edamame. “Here,” he said, pushing the soybeans against Jason's

cheek. Dabbing the corner of Jason's mouth with the wash cloth, he put gentle pressure on the small cut.

Tory wanted to run away. He'd done something bad. He lost his temper. *Just like your daddy.* Over and over again. *You're just like your daddy.* He should've known better. He should've been able to control it. Why didn't you just walk away? Huh? You couldn't just take a deep breath and act like a man? *Just like your daddy.*

“Shut up!”

“Tory?”

His hand was still pressed against Jason's lip, but he'd stopped moving. Jason's hand was around his, the one holding the wash cloth.

“Are you all right?”

“--rry.”

“What?”

“Sorry. I'm really sorry.” He pushed the washcloth into Jason's hand, heading toward his bedroom. “Can you let yourself out?” he said, locking the door quietly behind him.

Leaning against the wall next to the door, he didn't make a sound, carefully controlling his breathing until he heard Jason leave. When he heard the front door latch, he waited another minute just be sure Jason was gone before he sank to the floor, tears pouring down his face at an alarming rate. He shook. His mother's voice, her mother's voice, over and over again in that same resentful tone: *you're just like your daddy.* He felt six years old again, helpless and wondering what he'd done to make them all so unhappy.

He hated crying, but at least he hadn't done it in front of Jason. That would have felt manipulative. After several minutes, the intensity subsided and he forced himself to stop, wiping tears and snot on his shirt sleeve. He knew what would come next; he'd start thinking about how everything was his fault, how he ruined people's lives, how he shouldn't be here. Same old, same old. Getting up as a few stray tears slipped down his cheeks, he picked up the bottle and glass from the coffee table and went into the kitchen. He'd stop it before it started, he decided, and poured himself a glass.

Honestly, he wasn't sure what scared him more, wanting to disappear or turning to whisky every time he had a problem. Usually he told himself that whisky reminded him of his grandfather on his mother's side. His grandpa had been a good man, quiet, but good. He never said anything bad to Tory, at least. That usually made it okay. But he'd been drinking more lately, relying on it, rather than wanting it. Maybe Mama's right, he thought, taking a gulp and wincing. I am just like Dad. He drank the glass quickly and poured another. Thinking about this stuff tonight wouldn't get him anywhere. The most important thing was sleep. If he could just sleep, tomorrow would be better, he told himself, and took another drink.

The sound of the glass breaking against the floor was clear and satisfying to Tory. He hadn't meant to drop it; he certainly hadn't meant to spill the whiskey in the glass. The alcohol was beginning to affect him and steadying himself against the counter, he took a plate from the cabinet. He felt irritated looking at its shiny surface and threw it to the floor with the glass, sending it into several pieces. Laughter bubbled up from inside him and he grabbed another plate. This one, he threw against the wall, watching the pieces explode into the air and fall to the floor. Pulling out one plate at a time, he went

through all eight salad plates first, smashing them against different surfaces in the kitchen, before moving to the larger dinner plates and different walls throughout the front of his house. Some of them hit on their edges and landed on the carpet and he'd chase them down and find another surface to break them against, laughing each time the pieces went flying.

When he finished with the plates, he moved to the bowls and then the glasses. There were glass shards of all different colors; the tea-colored shards were from some hand-me-down glasses he'd been given by his mother, the white from the bowls and plates he'd bought when he went to graduate school. The clear glass was from a set he'd found at Goodwill for \$0.50 each when he and Ian moved into their first apartment. There were a few clear shards with red and green stripes from an Italian cream soda glass he'd gotten at Old Spaghetti Factory.

By the time he was out of dishes, he could barely stand. His laughter was gone and as he looked at his empty hands, he could see the lines of his house through him. Tom had said he was half a person. He wondered where the other half had gone, what it was like. Would it make him better? He wasn't sure he liked the idea that he would be changed. It had taken him so long to get used to who he was. Using the wall to steady himself, he walked slowly to the bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror. The frame of the door showed through his skin. He broke the glass in the mirror with his left hand. Ignoring the cuts, he opened the door with the broken mirror and took out the pack of cigarettes and lighter he'd left in there, just in case. He lit a cigarette and sat tight up against the corner, letting his head empty as the smoke filled his lungs. As he let himself go, he felt the flapping of wings against his back. He'd experienced it once before, when

he was a kid. Searing pain shot through his shoulder blades as talons clawed through his skin and under his bones. The wings lifted him up as the bird screamed.

CHAPTER 7

“I hope you don’t mind,” Tom said slowly as he looked around the room. “I let myself in.”

Glass crunched under his shoes and he stepped gingerly through the living room, peeking around corners as he searched for Tory.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” he continued speaking as though he were using his voice for sonar, walking through the dark house.

Making his way through the house room by room, he found Tory sitting on the floor in the bathroom, backed up against a corner.

“You made quite a mess, son.” Tom bent down next to him and waved his hand in front of Tory’s face. Nothing. He grunted, standing back up. “This may call for reinforcements,” he said, backing out of the bathroom and sitting down on the couch. He pulled out a cell phone and pressed zero.

“I need a connection,” he said. “We have a,” he paused, looking for the most delicate word, “situation.” No need to cause alarm, he figured. “That’s the one. Thanks.”

He hung up the phone and waited. The boy was more fragile than he’d realized. Well, when things didn’t go as planned, you just change plans, he thought. No matter what, he wasn’t letting that old bastard have his way. It wasn’t just about that, either. He felt responsible; it wasn’t Tory’s fault he’d been dragged into all this. That greedy old man had lured Tory across the creek when he was a child and taken something from him.

It was hardly fair and lord knew what he'd told the boy. For now, all Tom could do was watch over Tory until back up came. It took about an hour, but he finally saw the headlights as the car pulled into the driveway. Getting up, he walked into the empty wall in the kitchen and ran his fingers over the surface until he found what he was looking for. He opened the makeshift door and stepped through, just as he heard the key turn in the lock in the living room.

"Jesus," Ian said as he pushed the door open and turned the light on. Smith stepped in behind him. "Tory?" There was no answer. "Careful, there's glass," he said, walking into the room. Pieces of plates and cups were scattered through the living room. Ian hadn't been able to reach Tory since he'd come up to the cabin in the middle of the night. That was a week ago and he was worried, rightfully so, it seemed. He was glad he had a key.

"Is he here?" Smith asked.

"His truck's outside."

Ian stepped into the kitchen as Smith headed down the hall. The first room was the bathroom and she stuck her head in.

"There you are," Smith said softly. There was enough light from the living room that she could make out mostly everything in the bathroom; something in her gut told her to leave the light off. Tory was sitting on the bathroom floor with a lit cigarette in his hand, the ashes dangerously close to falling to the ground. "I thought you quit," she said gently. Pushing the glass from the mirror away with her shoe, she crouched down next to him and took the cigarette from his hand, throwing it in the toilet. She studied his face for a moment, but there was nothing, not even a flicker.

“Ian,” she said. “He’s in here.” As she touched his hand, she felt something wet and a bit sticky and added, “bring some paper towels.”

“Oh, Jesus, that’s a lot of blood,” Ian said, turning his head. Smith took the towels from him.

“It’s not that much. Why don’t you go buy some bandages? Some disinfectant? There’s a 24-hour Walgreens up the street.”

“Yeah. I’ll do that.”

Smith turned back to Tory. “Can I clean your hand?” She took his silence as a yes and wet a paper towel in the sink. “It might hurt a little.” Gently, she wiped the blood off his hand, telling him each thing she was doing, hoping that her voice might wake him up or that it was at least comforting to him. After she wiped the blood away, she took another paper towel and dried his arm; most of the cuts had quit bleeding and she could see that they were shallow. “At least you won’t need stitches.”

As she continued to clean him up, her red hair fell in her face. Tory slowly reached out with his other hand and pushed it behind her ear. “So you’re in there after all?” she smiled as he looked at her finally. Putting the bloody paper towels in the sink, she took his face in both hands and, sitting up on her knees, kissed his forehead.

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